Seeking an Inner Refuge

By His Holiness the Dalai Lama

The Purpose of Buddhism

From the Buddhist point of view, the minds of ordinary people are weak and distorted because of the delusions and emotional afflictions they carry within. As a result, they are unable to see things as they actually exist; what they see is a vision that is twisted and defined by their own emotional neuroses and preconceptions.

The purpose of Buddhism is to remove these distortions from the mind and thus facilitate valid perception. As long as we have not uprooted our delusions our perception remains tainted; when we eradicate them we enter a state of always seeing reality as it is. Then, because our mind abides in perfect wisdom and liberation, our body and speech automatically course in wholesome ways. This benefits not only us but also others, in both this life and those that follow. Therefore, Buddhism is said to be a path not simply of faith but also one of reason and knowledge.

How to study Buddhism

Tibetans are fortunate to have been born into a society where spiritual knowledge was both available and highly appreciated. However, having been born into it perhaps we sometimes took it for granted. The Buddha himself said, “Test my words as carefully as goldsmiths assay gold and only then accept them.” The Buddha taught people of all backgrounds and levels of intelligence for a long period of time. Consequently, each of his teachings must be weighed carefully for meaning and evaluated to determine whether it is literally true or only figuratively so. Many teachings were given in particular circumstances or to beings of limited understanding. Accepting any doctrine or aspect of a doctrine without first scrutinizing it analytically is like building a castle upon ice—one’s practice will be unstable and lack fundamental strength and depth.

Practicing Dharma

What does “practice Dharma” mean? Literally translated, Dharma means “that which holds”; it is the spiritual teaching that keeps or leads us out of suffering. Buddhism asserts that although at the moment our mind is overpowered by delusion and distortion, ultimately there is an aspect of mind that is by nature pure and unstained, and that by cultivating this purity and eliminating mental obscurations we are “held back” from suffering and unsatisfying experiences.

Buddha taught the potential purity of mind as a fundamental tenet of his doctrine, and Dharmakirti, the Indian logician who appeared a millennium later, established its validity logically. When this seed of enlightenment has been sufficiently cultivated, we gain the experience of nirvana, freedom from all the shortcomings of samsara. As well as the concept of the seed of enlightenment, Dharmakirti validated logically the entire spectrum of Buddhist tenets, including the law of karma, the concept of rebirth, the possibility of liberation and omniscience, and the nature of the Three Jewels of Refuge: Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

As for the actual mode of practice, it’s a mistake to practice without a logical understanding of the doctrine. We should know well just what we are doing and why, especially those of us who are monks or nuns and have dedicated our entire lives to the practice of Dharma; we should be particularly careful to practice immaculately. The Sangha is very important to the stability of the doctrine; therefore, we should do our best to emulate the Buddha himself. Those considering ordination should first think well; there is no need to become a monk just to be an inferior monk. The Sangha has the responsibility of embodying the precepts. If you want to lead an ordinary life, leave monasticism to those of greater spiritual inclination and simply practice as a layperson as best you can.

All world religions are similar in that they provide methods for cultivating wholesome aspects of mind and eliminating unwholesome ones. Buddhism is a particularly rich religion because, having developed in India when the country was at a high point spiritually and philosophically, it presents both a total range of spiritual ideas and a rational approach to the methods of spiritual development. This is particularly important in this modern era, when the rational mind is given such credence.

Because of this aspect of rationality, Buddhism finds little difficulty in confronting the modern world. Indeed, many of the findings of modern science, such as those of nuclear physics, which are considered new discoveries, have long been discussed in ancient Buddhist scriptures. Because Buddha’s last advice to his disciples was that they should never accept anything on faith alone but only through rational investigation, the Buddhist world has always managed to keep the spirit of inquiry very much alive within its precincts. This is unlike many other religions, which lay claims on the truth and thus never allow any type of investigation that seems to threaten their limited descriptions of reality.

The Three Jewels of Refuge

Whether or not you are a Buddhist is determined by whether or not you have taken refuge in the Three Jewels—Buddha, Dharma and Sangha—purely, from the depths of your heart. Simply reciting Buddhist prayers, playing with a rosary or walking around temples does not make you a Buddhist. Even a monkey can be taught to do these things. Dharma is a matter of mind and spirit, not external activities. Therefore, to be a Buddhist, you must understand exactly what the Three Jewels of Refuge are and how they relate to your spiritual life.

With respect to refuge in Buddha, we talk about the *causal* Buddha refuge—all the buddhas of the past, present and future, of whom the most relevant to us is Buddha Shakyamuni—and the *resultant* Buddha refuge—refuge in our own potentiality for enlightenment, the buddha that each of us will become. As for refuge in Dharma, there is the Dharma that was taught in the scriptures and that which is the spiritual realization of what was taught. Finally, we take refuge in Sangha, in both ordinary monks and nuns, who are symbols of the Sangha, and the arya Sangha—those beings who have gained meditational experience of the ultimate mode of truth. Therefore, we say that Buddha is the teacher, Dharma is the way and Sangha are the helpful spiritual companions.

Of these three, the most important to us as individuals is the Dharma, for ultimately only we can help ourselves—nobody else can achieve our enlightenment for us or give it to us.

Enlightenment comes only to the person who practices Dharma well, who takes the Dharma and applies it to the cultivation of his or her own mental continuum. Therefore, of the Three Jewels, Dharma is the ultimate refuge. By hearing, contemplating and meditating on Dharma our lives can become one with it and enlightenment an immediate possibility.

Karma

All the great Kadampa masters of the past stressed that refuge must be practiced in the context of an intense awareness of the law of cause and effect; it requires observance of the law of karma as its support. Buddha said, "You are your own protector and your own enemy." Buddha cannot protect us; only our own observance of the law of karma can. If we keep our refuge purely and live in accordance with karma, we become our own protector; if we don't, if we live in a way contradictory to the spiritual path, we become our own worst enemy, harming ourselves in this and future lives.

The mind of an ordinary person is undisciplined and uncontrolled. To be able to engage in higher Buddhist practices, such as the development of samadhi, insight into emptiness or the yogic methods of the various tantric systems, we must first cultivate a disciplined mind. On the basis of refuge and self-discipline we can easily develop ever-increasing experiences in higher Dharma practices but without the foundation of discipline our higher practices will yield no fruit.

Developing practice

We all want to practice the highest techniques but first we have to ask ourselves if we have mastered the lower prerequisites, such as discipline. The aim of refuge is to transform an ordinary person into a buddha; when this has been accomplished the purpose of refuge has been fulfilled. The moment our mind becomes Buddha, our speech becomes Dharma and our body, Sangha. However, the attainment of this exalted state depends upon our own practice of Dharma. Leaving practice to others while hoping for spiritual benefits for ourselves is an impossible dream.

In order to purify our mind of karmic and perception-related mistakes and cultivate the qualities of enlightenment within our stream of being, we ourselves must perform the practices and experience the spiritual states. The 108 volumes of the Buddha's word that were translated into Tibetan have one essential theme: purify the mind and generate inner qualities. Nowhere does it say that somebody else can do this for us. Therefore, in a way, the buddhas are somewhat limited—they can liberate us only by means of inspiring us to practice their teachings. Many buddhas have come before but we are still here in samsara. This is not because those buddhas lacked compassion for us but because we were unable to practice their teachings. Individuals' progress along the spiritual path depends upon the efforts of those individuals themselves.

The ten virtuous actions

The process of self-cultivation has many levels. For beginners, however, the first necessity is to avoid the ten non-virtuous actions and observe their opposites, the ten virtuous actions. Three of these ten actions are physical: instead of killing we should value and cherish life; instead of

stealing we should give freely of what we can to help others; and instead of taking others' partners we should respect their feelings. Four actions concern speech: instead of lying we should speak the truth; instead of causing disharmony by slandering others we should encourage virtue by speaking about their good qualities; instead of speaking harshly and sharply our words should be soft, gentle and loving; and instead of conversing meaninglessly we should engage in meaningful activities. Finally, three of the ten actions concern mind: we should replace attachment with non-attachment; ill-will towards others with feelings of love and compassion; and incorrect beliefs with realistic attitudes.

Every Buddhist should follow these ten fundamental disciplines. Not doing so while engaging in so-called higher tantric methods is simply fooling yourself. These ten are simple practices, observances that anybody can follow, yet they are the first step for anybody wanting to work towards the powerful yogas that bring enlightenment in one lifetime.

When we take refuge and become a Buddhist we must honor the family of buddhas. Engaging in any of the ten non-virtues after having taken refuge is to disgrace Buddhism. Nobody is asking you to be a Buddhist; you're a Buddhist because you've chosen to be. Therefore you should qualify yourself accordingly, and the minimal qualification is to avoid the ten non-virtues and cultivate their opposites. Granted, nobody is perfect, but if you want to call yourself a Buddhist, you have to exert some effort. When something causes attachment or anger to arise within you, the least you should do is make an effort not to be overcome by that distorted state of mind and instead maintain a free and loving attitude.

Cultivating the mind

The essence of Dharma is cultivation of the mind because all the positive and negative karmas of body and speech originate in and are given direction by the mind. If you do not cultivate an awareness of your mental processes and the ability to cut off negative streams of thought as they arise, twenty years of meditation in a remote cave will be of little value. Before looking for a cave you should look for good qualities in your mind and develop the ability to live in accordance with Dharma. Only then will sitting in a cave be better than a bear's hibernation. Talking about doing tantric retreat while the ten foundations of Dharma are still beyond you is simply making yourself a laughing stock.

Making this life useful

As humans, we have the potential to attain enlightenment in a single lifetime. However, life is short and much of it has already passed by. We should ask ourselves how much spiritual progress we have made. Death can arrive at any moment and when it does we must leave behind everything except the mental imprints of our life's deeds. If we have practiced and tried to live in accordance with Dharma during our life, or even gained realizations, that energy will be there within our mind. On the other hand, if we have spent our life in non-virtue, negative thoughts and memories of our samsaric ways will occupy our consciousness when it goes to the next life.

Therefore, now, while we have the ability, we should practice Dharma intensively and purely. Dharma practice will bring peace and harmony to both ourselves and those around us, even in

this life, and, should we not achieve enlightenment in this lifetime, it will give us a wish-fulfilling jewel that we can carry into future lives to help us continue along on the spiritual path.

Ultimately, our future is in our own hands. Most people make fantastic plans for next week, next month and next year, but what counts most is to practice Dharma right now. If we do this, all our aims will be fulfilled. When we cultivate virtuous activities today, the laws of dependent arising ensure that a positive stream of change is set in motion. This is the preciousness of being human: we are able to affect dynamically our own future state of being by applying discriminating wisdom to all the actions of our body, speech and mind. To use and cultivate this discriminating wisdom is to extract the very essence of the human life.